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ABSTRACT

Student brinkmanship in residence halls, resident assistant (RA) leadership, and residence social climate are discussed. In "brinking" the system, students challenge authority in ways that provide scant grounds for the institution to apply punishment. The study looks at relationships between: the RA's leadership behavior and student perceptions of brinkmanship; student perceptions of social climate and brinkmanship in the residence hall environment; RA leadership and residence hall climate; and RA attitudes toward student brinkmanship, student attitudes about brinkmanship, RA leadership, and residence hall social climate. Study participants were from residence halls of a major public university. Findings include: there is an inverse relationship between resident perceptions of student brinkmanship frequency and RA leadership behavior involving consideration and initiating structure; resident perceptions of frequent, hostile brinkmanship are inversely related to resident perceptions that the residence social climate is supportive of individual needs and institutional role expectations; student perceptions of RA leadership behavior characterized by consideration and initiating structure are positively related to their perceptions that the residence social climate is supportive of individual needs and institutional role expectations; and there is an inverse relationship between RA perceptions of brinkmanship frequency and the degree to which students view the residence social climate and RA leadership as supportive of individual needs and institutional role expectations. Contains 25 references. (SM)

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RESIDENT ASSISTANTS AND STUDENTS ON LEADERSHIP, RESIDENCE HALL CLIMATE AND STUDENT BRINKMANSHIP

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Running Head: STUDENT BRINKMANSHIP

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ABSTRACT

In an examination of student brinkmanship in residence halls, residence assistant (RA) leadership, and residence social climate, the investigators found that residents' perceptions (n=71 residence floors) of (RA) task and relationship-oriented leadership and floor climate characteristics supportive of individual and institutional needs were negatively correlated with brinkmanship frequency and to a lesser extent with hostility and hedonism. RAs perceptions of brinkmanship followed the same correlational pattern. As with previous studies, leadership behavior was positively correlated to resident perceptions of floor social climate. Other correlations suggested that older RAs are subject to less hostile and hedonistic brinkmanship. Number of quarters employed and RA grade point average produced no significant correlations with brinkmanship, leadership or climate variables.

STUDENT BRINKMANSHIP, RESIDENCE HALL LEADERSHIP, AND SOCIAL CLIMATE

Student challenges to the authority system of residence hall organization often stand in contrast to the tradition of scholarly discipline in institutions of higher education. Much of this assertive behavior might be described as student brinkmanship of university rules and regulations. Student brinkmanship (Licata and Willower, 1975), first noted in secondary schools, is assertive student behavior that challenges authority while avoiding negative sanctions. While student vandalism, academic dishonesty or substance abuse may attract the attention of many university authorities because of their visibility, severity or costs, the more subtle forms of challenges to the institution's authority system like student brinkmanship are more typical of student life and possibly more helpful indicators of the successful residence hall or university social structure.

In "brinking" the system, students mock or challenge authority in ways that provide scant grounds for the institution to apply rules or punishments. For instance, the resident assistant (RA), a student leader who often has the responsibility for a residence hall floor with 30-80 students, is sometimes the target of student brinkmanship. When the RA posts a notice, some unknown person may remove or change it. Some students may enjoy bouncing a tennis ball off the wall that separates their room from their RA's room.

If the RA complains, the students are likely to respond with a feigned apology. The next night, as the RA attempts sleep or study, the ball bouncing is sure to start again. Others may "penny-in" or trap the RA in his or her room. While the RA tries to open the door, sounds of other pranks are sure to fill the air. In each instance, the RA has little basis or evidence to identify or punish the culprits, and the students involved seem to know exactly how far to go before risking punishment. The discussion that follows employs three research questions in an exploratory study of the relationships among student brinkmanship, the leadership of resident assistants and residence hall social environment.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Residence Hall as a Social System

Snead and Caple (1971) suggested that the residence hall can be viewed as a social system or "small neighborhood" with its own social patterns. A residence hall includes institutional and individual dimensions (Baird, 1978; Walsh, 1975). The hierarchy of a residence hall provides for a division of labor that can facilitate learning for students, nurture a sense of community or serve as a system for enforcing the rules of the organization. In addition, students have individual needs that go beyond the requirements of their classes (Rich and Jollicoeur, 1979). They sometimes need interpersonal support from fellow students and those in authority, privacy, the freedom to express themselves,

opportunities to participate in the formal and informal life of the university and influence in decisions that affect them. Because student needs are complex and the RA's fuction is too, resident assistants sometimes experience conflicts in attempting to meet institutional expectations that call for the enforcement of bureacratic values on the one hand and expectations by students for interpersonal support on the other hand.

Research Questions

RA leadership emphasizing both institutional expectations and sensitivity to individual student needs may be subject to less frequent, less hostile or less hedonistic brinkmanship (Licata, 1980). Findings counter to this argument suggest that brinkmanship may be an expression of support, rapport or esprit de corps (Licata and Willower, 1975). In this case, brinkmanship might be viewed as adaptive behavior that reduces tensions present in both the RA and student roles. Given these competing explanations an initial research question is presented as a means toward hypothesis development: what is the relationship between the RA's leadership behavior and student perceptions of brinkmanship?

Of the four environmental variables that influence the residence hall student group (physical setting, organization structure, the human aggregate and social climate), social climate appears to mediate the influence of the other three (Moos, 1979). Although one might expect positive student perceptions of residence hall social climate to be associated negatively with the frequency,

hostility or hedonism of brinkmanship, Licata and Willower (1975) observed a positive relationship between these two variables in secondary schools. Students who were enthusiastic about everyday classroom life were also enthusiastic about student brinkmanship; students who were unenthusiastic about everyday classroom life were unenthusiastic about brinkmanship. These differing possibilities lead to the second research question aimed at hypothesis development: what is the relationship between student perceptions of social climate and brinkmanship in the residence hall environment?

The relationship between leadership and social climate in other settings tends to be positive (Stogdill, 1974). When RA leadership appears to satisfy the values of the institution and the student group, it might follow that students feel positive about social relationships. Certainly much of residence hall administration rests on this premise (Austin, 1977; Blimling and Miltenberger, 1981; Chickering, 1974 or; Upcraft and Pilato, 1982). A third research question is presented as a vehicle leading to further hypothesis development: what is the relationship between RA leadership and residence hall climate?

The fourth research question asks: what is the relationship among RA attitudes toward student brinkmanship, student attitudes about brinkmanship, RA leadership and residence hall social climate? In a study of brinkmanship in secondary schools, Licata and Willower (1975) found that teachers viewed student

brinkmanship as a threat to their social position in schools and viewed brinkmanship more negatively than students. Although problems encountered by RAs (Schuh and Shipton, 1986) might be interpreted to suggest the same tendency, the quasi-peer relationship between an RA and residents is somewhat different than between a teacher (adult) and students (adolescent) in secondary schools. As a result, caution is suggested in predicting the relationship between RA and student perceptions as well as in predicting the direction of correlations among RA perceptions and other variables in this study.

METHODOLOGY

Sample

The RAs and students in this study were from a residence hall system of a major public midwestern university. The residence halls housed 11,000 students. All but four of the campus residence halls were included in the study. Two of the four were excluded because they were graduate facilities characterized by somewhat different relationships between students and staff then in the other residence halls due to a higher mean age of residents and a higher proportion of foreign students. Two other halls housed freshman exclusively and also had a staff-student ratio that was considerably larger than other facilities. The remaining twenty residence halls were staffed by 144 RAs on 144 floors. The floor was the unit of analysis.

Data from all 144 RAs were collected in an administrative meeting with all RAs present. The researchers randomly selected sixteen students from each of the 144 floors using floor charts. Recent additions to these lists were excluded so that respondents had at least an academic quarter of experience on the residence floor. Students were polled using the residence hall mail system. Overall, 29 percent of the residents responded to the survey. As recommended by Halpin (1957), only floors represented by at least four completed student questionnaires were included in data analysis. This resulted in a sample of 71 residence hall floors, approximately 50 percent of the total possible.

Instrumentation

The Leadership Behavior Description Questionnaire (LBDQ) measures a leader's behavior through the perceptions of subordinates. Two subscales of the LBDQ account for approximately 83 percent of the variance in subordinate perceptions of their leader: Consideration (C) and Initiating Structure (IS). Consideration refers to friendship, mutual trust, respect, and warmth in the relationship between the leader and members of the group. Initiating Structure represents the extent to which leaders organize and define the relationship between themselves and the members of their group, define the roles of group members, endeavor to establish well-defined patterns of organization and communicate ways of getting the job done (Halpin, 1957). The estimated split-half reliabilities of the two subscales

are 0.83 for IS and 0.92 for C (Halpin, 1957). Alpha reliability coefficients computed using the data from this study were .93 for C and .87 for IS.

A seven point semantic differential (Osgood et al., 1957) was employed to measure RA and student perceptions of brinkmanship in terms of three connotative meanings: frequency, hostility and hedonism. Respondents were asked to read a scenario describing selected brinkmanship behaviors in the residence hall context and respond to the semantic differential using the concept, "If this kind of behavior occurs on my floor, it is...". These behaviors tended to emphasize the RA as their target.

Brinkmanship Frequency refers to how often the behavior takes place. Hostility reflects an unfriendly or belligerent aspect of the behavior. Hedonism refers to the degree of enjoyment associated with the behavior. Five bi-polar adjective pairs were selected to represent each subscale; for example, frequent-infrequent (frequency), cruel-kind (hostility), or witty-dull hedonism). A three factor structure was confirmed through a varimax rotated matrix. Two hedonism scales were dropped due to relatively weak loading on the hedonism subscale or relatively heavy loading on another subscale. The three brinkmanship subscales accounted for approximately 78% of the variance. Alpha coefficients for the three subscales were 0.94 for frequency, 0.87 for hostility and 0.84 for hedonism.

A forty-item short form of the University Residence Environment Scale (URES) was employed to measure residence hall social climate (Moos and Gerst, 1974). The instrument is composed of three dimensions: Relationship, Personal Growth and Development, and System Maintenance and Change. Each dimension is composed of a number of subscales. Relationship includes subscale measures of Involvement and Emotional Support, Personal Growth and Development includes Independence, Traditional Social Orientation, Competition, Academic Achievement, and Intellectuality. System Maintenance and Change includes Order and Organization, Student Influence and Innovation. Each subscale has four items scored on a true-false response scale. Alpha reliability coefficients range from .70 to .89 for the ten subscales, .90 for Relationship, .96 for Personal Growth and Development, and .89 for System Maintenance and Change.

Data Analysis

Pearson Product-Moment correlation coefficients were calculated to assess the relationships between theoretical variables. Correlations also were obtained between theoretical variables and selected demographic variables. In the event that the nature of the relationships warranted, regression analysis was considered as an option for further exploration of relationships. A two-tailed test for significance was employed with .05 as the lowest acceptable level.

RESULTS

Table 1 presents the correlations relative to the first research question concerned with the relationship between student perceptions of RA leadership and student brinkmanship. Frequency of brinkmanship was significantly correlated to RA Consideration (-.53) and Initiating Structure (-.52). There were no significant correlations between measures of brinkmanship hostility or hedonism and RA leadership measures.

[table 1 goes about here]

The second research question was concerned with the relationship between student perceptions of residence hall social climate and student brinkmanship. The correlation matrix of this relationship is presented in table 2. The frequency of student brinkmanship was correlated significantly with URES Emotional Support, i.e., the manifest concern for others in the residence (-.34), Independence, i.e., freedom allowed without social sanctions (.30), Traditional Social Order, i.e., emphasis on dating and party going (-.32), Competition among residents over dating and grades (.30), Academic Achievement emphasis in the residence

(-.35), and Order and Organization, i.e., formal structure in the residence (-.30).

[table 2 goes about here]

The relative hostility of brinkmanship was significantly related to Involvement, i.e., the degree of commitment to the residence and residents (-.29) and Intellectuality, i.e., the emphasis on cultural and artistic activity (-.25). Brinkmanship hedonism was significantly correlated to Involvement (.30). There were no significant correlations between brinkmanship measures and the larger dimensions of Relationship, Personal Growth and Development, and System Maintenance and Change.

Table 3 presents the correlation matrix for the relationship between RA leadership and residence social climate, the focus of the third research question.

[table 3 goes about here]

RA Consideration was correlated significantly to URES Involvement (.33), Traditional Social Order (.34), Competition (-.25), Academic Achievement (.24), Order and Organization (.54) and the larger dimensions of Relationship (.29) and System Maintenance and Change (.27). RA Initiating Structure was correlated significantly with URES Involvement (.30), Emotional

Support (.23), Independence (-.43), Traditional Social Order (.31), Academic Achievement (.38), Order and Organization (.56), and the larger dimensions of Relationship (.31) and System Maintenance and Change (.27).

The fourth research question deals with RA perceptions of student brinkmanship and student perceptions of RA leadership, residence social climate and brinkmanship. Table 4 presents significant correlations that emerged in the analyses. RA perceptions of brinkmanship frequency were correlated significantly with student perceptions of RA Consideration (-.33), Initiating Structure (-.25) and URES Competition (.24), Academic Achievement (-.27), Order and Organization (-.35), Student Influence in the running of the residence (-.24), System Maintenance and Change (-.35) and brinkmanship frequency (.36). While there were no significant correlations between RA perceptions of brinkmanship hostility and variables based on student perceptions, there were significant correlations between RA perceptions of brinkmanship hedonism and URES Student Influence (-.30) and System Maintenance and Change (-.32).

[table 4 goes about here]

Correlations were computed for selected demographic variables supplied by the resident assistants and the theoretical variables in this study. RA age was significantly correlated to student

perceptions of the hostility (-.31) and hedonism (-.31) of brinkmanship (the older the RA, the less hostile and hedonistic the brinkmanship). Students with female RAs reported less Involvement (-.25), more Traditional Social Orientation (.25), less Competition, more Initiating Structure (.26) and more hostile (.24) but less frequent (-.31) brinkmanship. The number of quarters that the RA was employed and RA grade point average produced no significant correlations with other variables in this study.

Due to the relatively strong relationships between brinkmanship and the RA leadership variables, a decision was made not to employ regression analysis. The leadership variables are by far the strongest correlates with brinkmanship, clouding the effects of other variables. Instead hypotheses are presented below based on significant correlation coefficients only.

DISCUSSION

Findings related to the first research question suggest the following hypothesis:

> H^1: There is an inverse relationship between resident perceptions of student brinkmanship frequency and RA leadership behavior characterized by consideration and initiating structure.

Consistent with the concept of the residence hall as a social system, understood in terms of individual needs and institutional expectations for behavior, it may not be too surprising that behavior by the RAs which meets student needs and institutional

requirements tends to reduce student challenges to their authority. It appears that the more RAs are peceived by residents to incorporate both consideration and initiating structure in their leadership, the less frequent residents perceive student brinkmanship. While these findings initially can be understood with respect to RA-resident interaction in higher education, it is interesting to note that the characteristics of successful leadership in this setting are not unlike those reported as successful in other organizational settings (Newman and Licata, 1987 or Yukl, 1981).

Apparently RA leadership is not associated with student perceptions of hostile or hedonistic brinkmanship. This may indicate that brinkmanship is not necessarily related to student anger or antagonism over a lack of RA leadership or a hedonistic response to the tedium associated with organizational routines. If neither is the case, another view may be suggested, a view reminiscent of student challenges to laissez-faire approaches to leadership reported by Lewin, Lippitt and White (1939) more than four decades ago. Hollander and Julian (1978) have suggested a similar scenario in which the person in a formal position of authority is either unable or unwilling to provide leadership and is challenged by emergent leaders from the group. Given the notion of emergent leadership, it might be predicted that when RAs are unable to exert appropriate leadership, emergent or competing leadership may be manifested in an increase in the frequency if not the hostility and/or hedonism of student brinkmanship.

Viewing the residence unit as a social system, the following hypothesis might be advanced in response to the findings generated on the second research question in this study:

> H^2: Resident perceptions of frequent and hostile brinkmanship are inversely related to resident perceptions that the residence social climate is supportive of individual needs and institutional role expectations.

Higher degrees of brinkmanship frequency seemed to be associated with a reduced amount of perceived social structure providing residents with emotional support, order and organization, emphasis on dating and academic achievement as well as increased competition among residents over dating and grades and relative resident freedom or independence from sanctions associated with social control. Resident perceptions of brinkmanship hostility were associated with reduced feelings of commitment to the residence social group and reduced emphasis on intellectual or cultural activity. This pattern appears to describe a social environment that provides minimal support for meeting the needs of individual students, e.g., the need to belong, the need for emotional support from other organizational members or the need for an acceptable social setting for dating and other activity. Such an environment appears less than able to nurture institutional role expectations associated with academic achievement, intellectuality and order and organization.

Similar to the patterns of relationships noted in the previous hypotheses, RA leadership supportive of individual student needs

and institutional role expectations tended to be positively related to a social climate that is perceived by students as being supportive in the same ways. These relationships tend to suggest the following hypothesis:

H^3: Student perceptions of RA leadership behavior characterized by consideration and initiating structure are positively related to student perceptions that the residence social climate is supportive of individual needs and institutional role expectations.

Since RA and resident perceptions of the frequency of student brinkmanship were significantly and positively correlated, it should not be surprising that RA perceptions of brinkmanship frequency related to resident perceptions of leadership and social climate in a pattern similar to those described above for student perceptions of brinkmanship frequency. RA perceptions of less frequent brinkmanship were related to students' perceptions of decreased competition between students, increased consideration and student influence (suggestive of things supportive of student needs). RA perceptions of less frequent brinkmanship were related to increased initiating structure, System Maintenance and Change, order and organization and emphasis on academic achievement (suggestive of things supportive of institutional expectations). These relationships suggest the following hypothesis:

H^4: There is an inverse relationship between RA perceptions of brinkmanship frequency and the degree to which students view the residence social climate and RA leadership as supportive of individual needs and institutional role expectations.

CONCLUSION

Because of inconsistent fundings in related studies, the investigators formulated research questions to explore relationships between student brinkmanship, resident assistant leadership on dormitory floors, and floor social climate. Limitations in the sample and resident reponse rate led the researchers to produce four hypotheses, rather than conclusions, related to a conception of the residence floor as a social system. Characteristics of RA leadership and the social climate of the residence unit that nurture individual resident needs and institutional role expectations appear to be important ingredients in understanding the frequency, if not the hostility and hedonism of student brinkmanship. Apparently, student brinkmanship is a viable construct in examining everyday life in residence hall organizations, and perhaps other parts of the university.

Given limitations in the sample, return rate and operational definitions employed in this investigation, there is a need to replicate this study in other settings. The use of qualitative methods might be helpful in gaining more insight about relationships identified in this and future studies. Certainly, there is a need to better understand the hostility and hedonism dimensions of brinkmanship. Other theoretical frameworks and subsequent operational measures might add additional insight. For

instance, Fiedler's contingency theory (1978) or theoretical conceptions of environmental press (Brown, 1968 and; Stern, 1970) or organizational culture (Deal and Kennedy, 1982) might be fruitful avenues for further exploration of residence hall leadership and social climate, possibly using student brinkmanship as a dependent variable.

The findings in this study may have implications for professional practice in college student personnel. As suggested by Blimling and Miltenberger (1981) or Upcraft and Pilato (1982), the development of a strong cadre of residence assistants may well be a sound investment when one considers the importance of RA leadership with respect to student brinkmanship and residence hall social climate. Efforts to analyze and improve the social environment of residence halls to support individual and institutional aims also appear to be worthwhile endeavors. Each endeavor, may well be worth the effort, particularly in terms of the reduction of hidden costs associated with student alienation (Kegan, 1978) and the benefits associated with building an improved quality of life for students.

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TABLE I

Student Brinkmanship and RA Leadership Correlation Coefficients

Leadership	Brinkmanship		
	Frequency	Hostility	Hedonism
RA Consideration	-.53*	-.12	-.12
RA Initiating Sturcture	-.52*	.10	-.15

* $p < .001$.

TABLE 2

Social Climate and Student Brinkmanship Correlation Coefficients

Climate	Brinkmanship		
	Frequency	Hostility	Hedonism
Involvement	-.02	-.29*	.30*
Emotional Support	-.34**	.15	-.08
Independence	.30*	-.14	.22
Traditional Social Orientation	-.32**	-.11	-.10
Competition	.30*	-.04	.06
Academic Achievement	-.35**	-.04	.03
Intellectuality	-.11	-.25*	.11
Order & Organization	-.30*	-.07	.00
Student Influence	-.07	-.01	-.01
Innovation	-.02	-.01	-.07

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

Table 3

Floor Climate and RA Leadership Correlation Coefficients

Climate	Leadership	
	Consideration	Initiating Structure
Involvement	.33**	.30*
Emotional Support	.17	.23*
Independence	-.20	-.43***
Traditional Social Orientation	.34**	.31**
Competition	-.25*	-.15
Academic Achievement	.24*	.38**
Intellectuality	.19	.19
Order Organization	.54***	.56***
Student Influence	.02	-.02
Innovation	.12	.14
Relationship Total	.29*	.31*
Personal Growth Total	.19	.18
System Maintenance Change Total	.27*	.27*

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

*** $p < .001$.

Table 4

Significant Correlations for RA Perceptions of Student Brinkmanship and Student Perceptions of Other Variables

Student Perceptions	RAs on Student Brinkmanship		
	Hostility	Frequency	Hedonism
Competion	.03	.24*	.18
Academic Achievement	.08	-.27*	.07
Order Organization	.15	-.35**	-.15
Student Influence	.11	-.24*	-.30*
System Maintenance Change Total	.15	-.35**	-.32**
Consideration	.16	-.33**	-.08
Initiating Structure	.04	-.25*	.11
Brinkmanship Frequency	-.05	.36**	.15

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.